

Bush says airstrikes won't stop for Ramadan

■ Also, severe weather causes the crash of a U.S. helicopter trying to rescue a soldier in Afghanistan.

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WASHINGTON — American airstrikes in Afghanistan won't pause during the Muslim observance of Ramadan, President Bush said Friday.

"The enemy won't rest during Ramadan and neither will we," Bush said at the White House. "We're going to pursue this war until we achieve our objectives." The monthlong holiday begins around Nov. 17.

Also, in Afghanistan, a U.S. helicopter crashed while trying to rescue a sick soldier, and the injured crew had to be saved in turn.

The helicopter crashed at about 12:30 a.m. — nighttime in Afghanistan — because of severe weather. Four crew members were injured, though their wounds were not life-threatening, a Pentagon statement said.

A senior government official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said a second helicopter rescued the first chopper's crew. The Defense Department statement said the entire helicopter crew was safely returned from Afghanistan and the four injured were getting medical care.

The downed helicopter was later destroyed by F-14 Tomcats flying from the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, the Pentagon statement

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said, to prevent the helicopter from falling into Taliban or al-Qaida hands.

Freezing rain also had halted attempts to put more U.S. special forces on the ground, defense officials said Friday.

With the U.S. military campaign nearly four weeks old, Pentagon chief Donald H. Rumsfeld headed for the region to shore up support.

The president chided critics who are demanding more aggressive U.S. action and said the American people understand the struggle will be a long one.

"This is not an instant gratification war," the president said.

The 27 days of airstrikes have made it harder for the Taliban to communicate, to defend themselves, and to hide, the president said.

"We're slowly but surely tightening the net on the enemy," Bush said. Taliban air defenses have been demolished in the first four weeks of the air assault, he said.

During an in-flight interview Friday, Rumsfeld said the Taliban were "substantially weakened, in many cases cloistered away from the people." He said it would be "mindless" to slow the military campaign so Afghan factions could agree on an interim post-Taliban government.

"I don't think it's possible to manage the war campaign on the ground under a political timetable," Rumsfeld said.

He said it would be "hard to believe" that the U.S. special forces would not have to fire their weapons at Taliban fighters. He said that was not the main objective, however.

"They're not going in as an occupying ground force," Rumsfeld said.

He left Friday for a weekend trip to Russia, Tajikistan,

Uzbekistan, Pakistan and India. He was to start his tour in Moscow and meet with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Ivanov, to discuss arms control and other issues, and then visit the four other countries.

Rumsfeld said he planned to discuss the Bush administration's plans for a national missile defense system. Although Russia has said the planned defense system would violate the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, both countries hope to have an agreement on the issue before this month's meeting between Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"We will build a missile defense, and that can be done with the treaty still in place," Rumsfeld said.

His first trip to the region was in early October, when he met Uzbekistan's president and announced an agreement to base U.S. troops at one Uzbek air base for possible search-and-rescue and humanitarian missions. The Uzbek president said then he was not ready to accept U.S. special operations troops. Rumsfeld also visited Turkey, Egypt and Oman on that initial trip.

At the Pentagon Friday, Rear Adm. John Stufflebeem, deputy director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said efforts to insert another group of U.S. special forces troops in Afghanistan had been thwarted by poor weather. Freezing rain was preventing the use of helicopters.

On Thursday, Rumsfeld said bad weather and heavy fire at a landing area had prevented some of the U.S. teams from entering Afghanistan in recent days.

The United States has troops in Uzbekistan, including members of the Army's 10th Mountain Division. Several spoke by telephone with reporters at the Pentagon on

Friday and said living and working conditions there are better than they had expected. The soldiers, who were permitted to give only their first names and their ranks, said they could not discuss their operations.

Charles, a staff sergeant, said morale has been lifted by letters from supportive Americans. "They're coming in every day," he said.

Stufflebeem also said the Pentagon is deploying a JSTARS surveillance aircraft, which is used to track forces on the ground over hundreds of miles, as well as a Global Hawk unmanned aircraft, which is a long-range, high-altitude surveillance aircraft that has never before been used in a conflict. Both aircraft are capable of tracking targets in Afghanistan through any kind of weather.

JSTARS stands for Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System. The aircraft was first used in the Persian Gulf War.

The United States is having a difficult time pinpointing the chief terror suspect, Osama bin Laden, Stufflebeem said. U.S. intelligence officials say the search for bin Laden is focused on caves or tunnels where he might be hiding. Analysts are trying to narrow the search, looking primarily in the east and south, with reported sightings stretching from Kabul to the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar.

"He's an elusive character," Stufflebeem said.

Pentagon spokeswoman Victoria Clarke also said that on Thursday some 79 sorties had been flown, targeting Taliban caves, command-and-control units, and ground forces.

Rumsfeld said Thursday he hoped to triple or quadruple the number of special forces troops in Afghanistan, now between 100 and 200.